

# I. Open Admission: From Philosophy to Reality

## Peeling Off Labels

### **J.B. Alexander High School**

United Independent School District

Laredo, Texas

**Description:** Suburban

**Enrollment:** 1,885

**AP since:** 1995

**AP courses offered:** 11

**Highlights:** 80 percent of AP Exam takers are Hispanic.

**Best practice:** Open-door policy

The academic success of J.B. Alexander High School is attributable to a single, undefiable force—the students themselves.

“Our kids are very motivated and have always wanted a challenge...they like taking the difficult courses,” said head counselor Velma Martinez.

The school’s well organized Advanced Placement program and open-door policy to AP courses give students (90 percent of whom are Hispanic in this Mexican border town) the greatest opportunity to succeed academically.

Students simply do not have to meet any criteria to take AP.

“It’s open to everyone and it is supposed to be,” said Principal Severita Sanchez.

“We don’t say to any child, ‘You can’t join because you don’t have the grade,’” Martinez said.

“By having that open-door policy, you tap more students,” she added. “Some students might be afraid or feel they don’t have what it takes to be in the courses, but once they try it, they say, ‘Wow! This is something I can do.’”

Students and parents are advised of the expectations of the program so that they can make their own decisions to participate in AP courses.

The school holds an AP night twice a year at the beginning of each semester. AP teachers set up projects, reports, and text books in the library and conduct a “mini teach” to explain to parents the rigors of AP.

"A lot of our parents...get very upset when their kids don't come home with As," Sanchez said. "But the AP teacher says, 'Yes, but look what your child is doing and being challenged with.' The parent now has a better understanding of what the child is exposed to... [and] they are impressed."

AP courses are weighted to boost students' GPA, adding an extra incentive to participate. And AP is popular to boot.

"The kids push AP a lot because they talk to each other," Sanchez observed.

### Vertical Team Approach

Teachers attend state-sponsored professional development workshops and plan content across grade levels in what is known as a vertical team approach.

J.B. Alexander High School includes a magnet health and science program with about 450 students, for whom AP is required. But perhaps more interesting is the way the school gets other students into the pipeline.

"For eight years [prior to secondary school], students have thought that the only ones who can be in these advanced courses are those identified as 'GT'—gifted and talented," Martinez explained. "But once they go to the high school we tell them they don't have to be identified as gifted and talented to take AP. A lot of students are not labeled 'GT' but are very smart and hardworking. They can handle it."

Students are encouraged to take the AP Examinations and the state of Texas provides funding to support exam fees.

Some of the school's AP teachers insist that all students in their courses take the AP Examinations, Sanchez explained. "It's nonnegotiable and they usually do very, very well."

Special tutoring kicks in on Saturdays and after school to further prepare students for the examinations.

"All you have to do is feed them pizza. It works. The kids come," Sanchez said. "A lot of them are just your average kids who have been given an opportunity to...take those college courses for free and take the test."

Counselors are a big part of the program and play an important role by visiting the feeder middle schools to inform and encourage students to participate.

"It works and we want to see our students taking advanced courses and being prepared for college. We challenge them to do the best that they can," Martinez said.